

'Veteran ploy'

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With Veterans Day right around the corner, you can expect Republicans in Washington to use the occasion to ramp up their partisan sniping. It seems they use every veterans holiday or commemoration to accuse Democrats of leaving our veterans behind.

But this Veterans Day, I see two reasons why the GOP won't be quite as brash as usual.

First, Republicans in Congress and the White House have repeatedly defeated Democratic attempts to end the war in Iraq and bring our troops home. They know the country no longer supports their ill-conceived war, and their insistence on continuing it in the face of reason is a losing proposition.

The second reason Republicans won't follow their normal anti-Democrat diatribe is that Democrats this year spearheaded the largest single funding increase in the 77-year history of the Veterans Administration. These vital funds for veterans programs are the least we can do for these heroes, but Republicans are only reminded that their own leadership in the past failed to make vets a priority.

This years funding bill, which provides for VA programs and military construction projects, will be sent to the president soon. Among the many other vital programs in the bill are funds to be used to reduce the 400,000 claims backlog for veterans waiting for benefits and money to support critical maintenance of VA health care facilities.

Many of our uniformed men and women--and their families--are facing economic strain from multiple deployments abroad, and Democrats responded with a 3.5 percent pay raise. The president called this raise "unnecessary" and has threatened to veto. Democrats also fought to provide for the 60,000 survivors and widows of those who have died from service-connected injuries, funds the president doesn't deem necessary.

So what does the president propose to do with the country's hard-earned money? Stay the course in Iraq. The president's newly-found fiscal prudence must be placed next to his recent request for an additional \$200 billion to maintain our occupation of Iraq. Yes, that's billion with a "B," a number just as difficult for me to comprehend as it is for you. This would bring the president's war spending to \$800 billion.

Take a few moments to ponder the other priorities we could support with those funds, and you'll be left breathless. From education to first responders, health care for children to housing for the homeless, the possibilities are endless. Instead, we have a war nearing its five-year anniversary and a national debt that has ballooned under the president's tenure.

I'm honored to work with Democratic leaders in Congress to support our veterans. The military and those who have served in it are vital to the Central Coast. Our region is home to more than 36,000 veterans; Santa Cruz alone is home to more than 14,000. From health care to VA benefits to affordable housing, we owe it to our veterans to make them our number one priority.

Veterans are truly the lifeblood of the country. Not only do they risk their life in service, but they return home to form the core of our communities. In the Central Coast, our veterans are more likely to have gone to college and less likely to be unemployed. They also enjoy a median income nearly double the regional average.

I'm proud to support the many local programs we have for our veterans. We're working toward establishing a veterans' cemetery on former Fort Ord land. I'm excited to help our local officials in that process, and look forward to the end product. We're also seeing progress toward a new joint VA/DoD health care facility. Too many of our vets have to drive too far for health care, and making that care available locally is a top priority.

My district office is also leading the local efforts of the Veterans History Project, which is a program run by the Library of Congress. We are collecting stories from our wartime veterans, histories that will be part of a permanent archive. We must never forget the contributions of our veterans, and they're the best ones to relate their experiences.

The bottom line is that Congress is finally paying the attention to our veterans and active duty forces that they deserve. We will continue to battle the president's veto threats and will work hard to maintain high funding levels for our veterans programs. It's the least we can do.